



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE ENGLISH JOURNAL

VOLUME II

JANUARY 1913

NUMBER I

OUR PROBLEMS¹

FRED NEWTON SCOTT
University of Michigan

It is the fortune of teachers of English—whether good or ill will appear later—that they have to do with a subject of universal interest. Not everybody cares about algebra and geometry. A limited number are interested in Cicero and Virgil. Even history and civics and manual training are allowed to be the special property of a fraction of the community. But English is everybody's subject. Everybody uses it; everybody thinks he knows how it should be taught; everybody has some opinion about the success or failure of current methods of teaching it.

This universal interest has its drawbacks, no doubt. For one thing, it exposes us to a good deal of unintelligent, or at least uninspired, criticism. But it has also the great advantage that when we are engaged, as we are now, in trying to solve some of our hard problems, it brings to us help and suggestion from unexpected quarters. If in a moment of acute distress we raise a Macedonian cry, responses come from every side; not only from our own people, but from the psychologists, the sociologists, the philologists, the principals and superintendents, the journalists and writers of fiction, even the college presidents—not to mention the presidents of the United States. It is to certain outside contributions of this sort, for which no specific place has been reserved on the program, that I will direct your attention in my brief remarks.

¹The President's annual address before the National Council of Teachers of English, Chicago, November 29, 1912.

Two of the most difficult problems that teachers of English are called upon to solve relate the one to English composition, the other to English literature. The first is, How shall the efficiency of our teaching of composition be tested or evaluated? The second is, How can we arouse and maintain in our students a genuine interest in the English classics? To each of these questions an answer of a rather revolutionary character has recently been proposed.

The answer to the first question comes from the psychologists, and takes the form of the so-called Thorndike scale as adapted by Dr. Hillegas to the grading of compositions. Inasmuch as a detailed description of the scale has appeared in the *Teachers College Record* for September and a briefer account in the November number of the *English Journal*,¹ I need mention only the more important features. Having brought together seven thousand samples, partly artificial and partly natural, the investigators, by a most ingenious method of testing and computing, selected ten compositions which were thought to represent every important step from the lowest to the highest. These ten compositions, arranged in the order of increasing merit, constitute the scale or (if I may be allowed the coinage) grammatometer. The lowest sample, marked zero, is supposed to be the worst composition conceivable; the highest, marked 1,000, is supposed to be as good a piece of writing as any young person is likely to achieve. The interval between one composition and the next is thus about 100 degrees on a scale of 1,000, 10 degrees on a scale of 100, and 1 degree on a scale of ten. The method by which the varying judgments of the 450 readers who marked the samples were reduced to averages is too technical to admit of description here, but in general it may be said that the scale represents a practical agreement of about 75 per cent of the judges. I will give three examples of these compositions, two of them, as it happens, treating of the same subject. The first example is artificial and has a value of 183, that is, it ranks about 2 points above zero on a scale of 10.

MY FAVORITE BOOK

the book I refer to read is Ichabod Crane, it is a grate book and I like to rede it. Ichabod Crame was a man and a man wrote a book and it is called

¹ E. C. Noyes, "Standardizing the Measurement of Composition."

Ichabod Crane i like it because the man called it ichabod crane when i read it for it is such a great book.

The second example was written by a girl of eighteen in the first year of the high school. The value assigned to it is 675, that is, it ranks 4 points higher than the preceding on a scale of 10.

ICHABOD CRANE

Ichabod Crane was a schoolmaster in a place called Sleepy Hollow. He was tall and slim with broad shoulders, long arms that dangled far below his coat sleeves. His feet looked as if they might easily have been used for shovels. His nose was long and his entire frame was most loosely hung to-gether.

And now for an example of perfection. This was written by a boy in the Freshman class in college and is rated 937.

A FOREIGNER'S TRIBUTE TO JOAN OF ARC

Joan of Arc, worn out by the suffering that was thrust upon her, nevertheless appeared with a brave mien before the Bishop of Beauvais. She knew, had always known that she must die when her mission was fulfilled and death held no terrors for her. To all the bishop's questions she answered firmly and without hesitation. The bishop failed to confuse her and at last condemned her to death for heresy, bidding her recant if she would live. She refused and was lead to prison, from there to death.

While the flames were writhing around her she bade the old bishop who stood by her to move away or he would be injured. Her last thought was of others and De Quincy says, that recant was no more in her mind than on her lips. She died as she lived, with a prayer on her lips and listening to the voices that had whispered to her so often.

The heroism of Joan of Arc was wonderful. We do not know what form her patriotism took or how far it really led her. She spoke of hearing voices and seeing visions. We only know that she resolved to save her country, knowing though she did so it would cost her her life. Yet she never hesitated. She was uneducated save for the lessons taught her by nature. Yet she led armies and crowned the dauphin, king of France. She was only a girl, yet she could silence a great bishop by words that came from her heart and from her faith. She was only a woman, yet she could die as bravely as any martyr who had gone before.

To determine the rating of any specimen of composition by means of this device, it is only necessary to find in the samples which constitute the scale that one to which the given composition most nearly corresponds. Thus a composition which matches

the sample rated 300 is rated 300, one which matches the sample rated 900 is rated 900, and so on.

Now the first comment which has occurred to me in reading Dr. Hillegas' monograph is that as science the investigation is admirable and ought to be encouraged by all who are interested in the teaching of English composition or in the theory of rhetoric and criticism. No one, I am sure, can be more eager than I am for the strictly scientific study of problems in these fields. But when it is proposed, as it is, to use the scale forthwith in the teaching process, that is, in testing the efficiency of the teacher's work, I am disposed to advise caution and deliberation. Pure science is one thing, the wholesale application of it to practical uses is quite a different thing. In the material realm this distinction is of prime importance. Between the discovery of a new element or a new process and the use of it in commerce, a long and tedious interval must frequently elapse. To take a familiar instance, although the formula for synthetic rubber has long been known and is now a scientific datum, business men still hesitate to invest trust funds in artificial rubber companies. And if caution is necessary in applying science to plain matters of fact, how much more need is there when the application is not in the material realm but in the realm of imagination and emotion and the aesthetic sense. The truth is that the problems of teachers are not problems of pure science but problems of the spirit. The student's composition, as the teacher should look at it, is the expression of the student's life. To evaluate it is to evaluate life itself in one of its most delicate manifestations. When, however, applying to it a scale such as this, we strip it of its individual character and reduce it to an abstraction, we excise at one stroke the most significant and essential features. If we hold, with a recent school of philosophers, that "any attempt to unify life in terms of the intellect and impose upon it a scale of values is artificial," we must believe that whenever a piece of scientific machinery is allowed to take the place of teaching—which is in essence but an attempt to reveal to the pupil the unifying principle of his life—the result will be to artificialize the course of instruction.

I shall be told, no doubt, that this is, in effect, a protest against

any and all systems of grading compositions, and perhaps it is—I shouldn't worry greatly about that—but it is surely possible to draw a distinction between a system of measurement which grades a composition for the sake of the grading, that is, for scientific or administrative ends, and a system which evaluates it as a stage in the pupil's progress. To illustrate my point: Suppose that instead of asking, Is this composition, written by some unknown X, better than that, written by some unknown Y? we ask, Which is the more sincere expression of some growing individuality? or, Which will be more legitimately effective in its appeal to a certain audience?—why, handy-dandy, which is the justice, which is the thief? It is quite possible that a pupil whose best work is rated 900 in Dr. Hillegas' scale, may nevertheless be degenerating instead of advancing—he may be treading the primrose path to the everlasting fire; whereas the pupil whose best work is rated 400 may be on his way to that freedom and strength and sincerity of speech which will one day make him a power for good. Viewed from the standpoint of their spiritual development, the first should be rated zero, the second 1,000.

Indeed, Dr. Hillegas himself remarks, and the admission is most significant, that certain of the judges rated the inferior and artificial compositions higher than they should, on the supposition that they were the naïve expressions of very young children—a natural and quite normal procedure as it seems to me.

I leave this problem with you, then, with the seemingly paradoxical conclusion that we ought in every way to encourage Professor Thorndike and Dr. Hillegas in their attempts to provide us with a scale for the measurement of English compositions, but that when the scale is ready, we had better refrain from using it. If this sounds like the famous recipe for a salad which closes with the words "throw the entire mixture out of the window," you will not, I am sure, if you have followed me thus far, be under any misapprehension as to my meaning.

The second problem relates, as I have said, to English literature. How shall teachers make the English classics more interesting and vital? One way, it appears, if I may be permitted the Hibernicism, is not to read them at all, but to read something else

in their place. This ingenious method is suggested in the November number of the *World's Work* by Principal William McAndrew of the Irving High School, New York. His contention, if I read him aright, is that the English classics must go. They are obsolete. For the outworn writings of Sir Walter Scott, Thackeray, Pope, Addison, perhaps even Shakespeare, are to be substituted essays and stories in the current magazines.¹ Making the round of his school, Mr. McAndrew came upon a class in English literature and this is what he saw and how it impressed him:

The girls then devoted an hour to Sir Walter Scott and *Ivanhoe*. A bright teacher, by means of pictures and spirited conversation, endeavored to interest the young women of 1912 in the attempts of a writer of two generations ago to depict the life of twenty-three generations before his time.

This mediaeval gloom has now been dispelled by the introduction of the current magazine. Mr. McAndrew says:

Teachers who advocate the regular employment of the magazine as essential for the education of the rising generation insist that all the theories of training which advanced educators propound can be better observed by this study than by the best fixed courses now in vogue.

A teacher of English in his school who has discarded the English classics for the magazines reports that she has taken a new lease of youth:

I have taught the same English so many times that to me it is a dead language. I know that I can't keep up much longer the deception that DeQuincey, Pope, and Addison are the best literary diet for these girls. I have trod the rut so deeply into the ground that there is not a surprise possible for me in the whole road. I know that the dear youngsters simulate an interest, but it is from politeness and from the hope that some time an advantage of analyzing these moth-eaten worthies will appear. Poor children, they'll never read another line of any of these authors, or ever want to. If they ever write like Addison no one but an English teacher will read it.

I do not mean to poke fun at this new dispensation, as it may appropriately be termed, or to criticize it harshly. On the contrary, I have a great deal of sympathy with it. Any device which brings to the jaded teacher a renewal of zest in her work

¹Although a single magazine, and that of a purely expository character, is referred to in the article in question, it is not an unfair inference, I think, that fiction and poetry, if they are to be used at all, should be drawn from the same source.

deserves careful consideration and should be commended, at least provisionally, as a mental stimulus. But it must not be forgotten that mental stimuli are of varying degrees of worth. Some are profound and lasting in their effects, some are shallow and quickly exhausted. And it is usually the ephemeral, short-rooted stimulus which is on first acquaintance the most seductive. The history of human culture abounds in examples. I will quote from Mr. Bernard Shaw a passage which aptly illustrates this point:

To all wildly popular things comes, suddenly and inexorably, death, without hope of resurrection. All the king's horses and all the king's men cannot set the street pianos playing "Nancy Lee" again, though the tune is as good as it ever was and they once played nothing else. No book within our recollection had so mad a vogue in America as Du Maurier's *Trilby*: the elders of Trilby's day said there had been nothing like it since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. But the American booksellers still talk of the miracle of *Trilby's* death. They aver that the demand stopped in one day. When *La Fille de Madame Angot* was new, audiences used to encore the "Conspirator's Chorus" (borrowed from an old tune on which Beethoven wrote variations) half a dozen times. When Sir Charles Wyndham tried to revive the work, that chorus passed without the slightest notice. The street piano men of the East End will tell you that this psychological phenomenon repeats itself with every music hall song that becomes the rage. For weeks and sometimes months nothing else will be listened to; there is no limit to the number of repetitions people will not only stand but clamor for. Then in one day they will not tolerate it on any terms; it would be safer to play a Bach fugue. Now this does not happen to the higher works of art. The masterpiece begins by fighting for its life against unpopularity, by which I do not mean mere indifference but positive hatred and furious denunciation of it as an instrument of torture. Beethoven's Ninth Symphony did not "catch on" like the "Intermezzo" in *Cavalleria Rusticana*. It was described even by eminent musicians as an outrage by a madman. But in the long run Beethoven leaves Mascagni nowhere.

To instil into the minds of a class of boys or girls an appreciation of the delicate and kindly humor of Addison is, I grant, difficult. It taxes all a teacher's patience, ingenuity, enthusiasm, and knowledge of human nature. The insensitiveness to beauty, the indifference to things of the mind promoted by the conditions of modern life are terrible discouragements. On the other hand, to make pupils like Mrs. Reinhart's stories of celebrated crimes or the polite vaudeville of the popular magazines is almost as easy as lying. But after the liking has in each case been established, what a differ-

ence in the results! A single sentence of Addison, once it is really liked and appreciated, will vibrate in the memory for a lifetime, whenever it recurs attuning the mind to its own sweet and gracious harmony, whereas the thousands of clever sentences of a Robert Chambers or a Gouverneur Morris pour through the brain-paths like a flood and depart and leave no trace, unless it be, in the case of the worst of them, a slimy sediment.

It is the tragedy of education that this truth dawns only when it is too late to use it. If youth could but know! Says Cardinal Newman, speaking of the older classics in words that may be applied with little change to those of the modern world:

Passages, which to a boy are but rhetorical commonplaces, neither better nor worse than a hundred others, which any clever writer might supply . . . at length come home to him, when long years have passed, and he has had experience of life, and pierce him, as if he had never before known them, with their sad earnestness and vivid exactness. Then he comes to understand how it is that lines, the birth of some chance morning or evening at an Ionian festival or among the Sabine hills, have lasted generation after generation, for thousands of years with a power over the mind and charm which the current literature of his own day, with all its obvious advantages, is utterly unable to rival.

What will the readers of the current magazines remember a few years hence? Still more important, what that is worth while will they remember in common? One of the best things that can be said about the old classical education is that it created a community of interest in something great, noble, and finely wrought. Invisible bonds of fellowship bound together in the service of the spirit those who had read and enjoyed the poetry of Homer, Virgil, and Horace. Of late our teachers have been trying to secure a similar result from the classical specimens of English. They have felt that persons who had read appreciatively Milton and Lamb and Keats and Burke and Carlyle were communicants in a higher and happier brotherhood than those who had in common a knowledge, or, let us say, a reminiscence, of the latest best-seller. It may be they were wrong, but I am not yet convinced by the evidence.

I believe that we must continue to teach in the school and the university what cannot be learned by ordinary students under

ordinary conditions in the street and the shop, namely, the ideal values of men and things and society. For this purpose a certain detachment from the commonplace will always be necessary, and this is supplied by the fittest survivals of man's past expressions and communications. To make modern ears sensitive to the music of bygone ages will never cease to be one of the noblest of the teacher's functions. When we abandon that hard task for the easy appeal to current superficial interests, we rob the student of the best gift which it is ours to bestow.

All the materials of our teaching, it is true, tend by repetition to become hackneyed—hackneyed, I mean, to the teacher; they are new, it must be remembered, to each generation of pupils. How to preserve their freshness, how to take them up each year with undiminished enthusiasm, is the teacher's problem. Some relief, no doubt, may be found in varying the program. The field of literature is wide, and once the fetish of uniformity is given up, as it soon will be, a variety of literary material presents itself that cannot be exhausted in a lifetime. But the greatest source of enthusiasm is, after all, fresh light, increased knowledge, more intimate acquaintance, leading to new methods of approach. How deeply had this teacher, for whom no surprises were left, gone, I wonder, into the life and social atmosphere of Addison? For my part, I remember that after reading Beljame's *The Man of Letters and His Public* I felt as if I had never known Addison at all, and after reading the fascinating analysis of his technic in Professor Saintsbury's *History of English Prose Rhythm* I was fain to read once again a considerable part of the ever-delightful *Spectator*. The literature of any one of the masterpieces is so extensive that few teachers can hope to master it. How many make the attempt?

The most damaging charge, however, that Mr. McAndrew brings against the English classics is that they are unrelated to life, that the preparation for college by means of them is not a preparation for life. These phrases "preparation for life" and "relation to life" have been so bandied about of late that they have become stale and almost meaningless. Whenever I hear them I want to ask what this life is about which we hear so much and with which everything in education is to be so intimately con-

nected? Of what does it consist? Eating and drinking and running a typewriter and selling stocks and shoveling snow off the front walk? Is this the life for which our costly system of education is to provide? A turning over and over (to use Ruskin's simile) like that of a squirrel in a cage? If so, that is, if life means simply keeping oneself alive, our teachers are extravagantly overpaid. A little chloroform would achieve a better result at a fraction of the cost.

Earning a living is not all of life, even when life is upon the lower levels. Being a husband, being a father, being a friend and helper is as important as being a carpenter or a foreman of shops or a bookkeeper. Being the right kind of neighbor is vastly more difficult than being the right kind of architect, and raising children is a more responsible task than raising wheat. When Dr. Johnson replied to the visitor who protested that a man must live: "I do not see the necessity of it, sir," he meant, no doubt, that if a man only lives, his life might as well not be.

I do not know what is the latest and most approved preparation for the life of today, but I am sure that a preparation that broadens the mind, seasons the judgment, gives poise and flexibility, makes men tellers of truth and tolerators of the average weaknesses of human nature—this cannot be a bad preparation either for life or for college, whatever its constituent elements may be. And this is the preparation which the study of the English classics aims to give.

The reading of the *Sir Roger de Coverley Papers* from the *Spectator* may not fit a man to raise the perfect steer or construct a new kind of motor; it may not help him to get a bigger salary or to run the politics of his ward; but if it does no more than to sweeten his disposition and refine his sense of humor, to make him less grossly appreciative of Mutt and Jeff, or of the colored supplement of the Sunday paper, it has done a unique service and will not fail of its due reward. Our labor often seems hard and unfruitful, but let us not be discouraged. Those whom we have sent forth bearing precious seed will doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing their sheaves with them.